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SUBJECT: Education in Laos, Part I: The Primary Years

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¶1. Summary. This cable is the first in a series examining the education system in Laos, from elementary through university and technical/vocational schools. Future cables will examine the problems faced by secondary schools, the limits of tertiary education, and the growing role of private schools. Primary education in Laos faces huge challenges stemming from the basic demographics of the country coupled by economic challenges and poor incentives for teachers. The Government of Laos (GOL) knows it needs to strengthen the system in order to provide the kind of educated worker required to pull the country out of poverty, but does not have the resources to overcome the challenges it has identified. To do so successfully, however, would take a huge social mobilization and expenditure of resources far beyond anything currently being done in Laos today. We do not expect to see an Asian tiger in these jungles anytime soon. End Summary.

Demographic Building Blocks: The Numbers

¶2. The youth and diversity of the Lao population help explain both the current state of education and the need for serious reform. According to the 2005 census, of the roughly 6 million people in Laos, 44% are younger than 15, creating huge and growing pressure on the current capacity of the school system. In addition, the diversity of the Lao population creates a challenge for education officials from the earliest years: many young students do not speak the Lao language, and live in remote areas. Officially, Laos has 49 ethnic groups, which are often grouped into four language families. According to World Bank and Asian Development Bank (ADB) figures, the Lao-Tai group of lowland communities together account for 66% of the population. (The "Lao" themselves are 30% of the total population, with the 7 lowland Tai groups adding up to another 36%.) The other ethnic groups are splintered into comparatively small numbers: 32 different Austro-Asiatic groups form 23% of the total population, the two Hmong-Yu Mien groups together are 7%, and finally 7 Sino-Tibetan groups make up 3% of the population.

¶3. Laos is only 27% urbanized, and, outside the main cities, the 10,000 villages across 141 districts average only 500 people. Access to basic services varies widely; outside the main urban areas, about 30% of villages are off the road network and only one-third of rural villages have electricity. Per capita GDP is roughly \$600 per year, with the urban populations currently experiencing a much faster growth in prosperity and economic opportunity than their rural counterparts. Roughly 80% of the labor force is involved in subsistence agriculture. Finding teachers for this wide range of communities has been a huge challenge for the government. Add the problem of levels of childhood malnutrition that can be as high as 50% in the rural areas and the stage is set for an extremely difficult set of primary school years.

¶4. The GOL is heavily dependent on the largesse of the international community to achieve educational goals. According to a 2007 draft

UNESCO document, the GOL spends 15% of its budget on education, and approximately 40% of the total education expenditures were focused at the primary level. Official Development Assistance accounts for 57% of the GOL's education budget and 92% of its capital budget, according to 2007 review of expenditures by the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, ADB, and European Commission. In the 2004/2005 school year, for example, bilateral donors contributed \$37.15 million while multilateral donors added another \$15.61 million, with NGOs spending \$1.81 million on education. The main bilateral donors for the entire sector are Australia, Belgium, China, France, Germany, Japan, Korea, Sweden and the United States. Australia and France focus on primary education and teacher development. Belgium and Germany work in technical and vocational training. Japan, Korea and Sweden work across all levels.

15. Multilateral donors include the World Bank, ADB, UN agencies, and the European Union. The majority of aid seems to be directed to the primary and tertiary levels, with less than 8% of the aid received for secondary or vocational schooling. Many aid programs are also designed to improve central administration. The World Bank and ADB, with financial assistance from Australia and Sweden, are the largest donors to the primary education sector, with Japan as the single largest bilateral donor.

16. Although U.S assistance for education is primarily focused on tertiary education, via the Fulbright programs, a number of other U.S. aid programs benefit primary schools. A multi-year \$3 million U.S. Department of Agriculture-funded program run by the Humpty Dumpty Institute provides school lunches, school rehabilitation, mine clearance, and administrative assistance for schools in Khammouan province. The program, which benefits approximately 10,000 students, recently received a second tranche of funding from USDA. Catholic Relief Services has a \$1,330,000 USAID-funded pilot program to train teachers in Vientiane municipality in working with disabled students. With \$321,376 of funding from PM/WRA, the NGO World Education/Consortium educates primary school students (and others) on the dangers of unexploded ordnance.

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THE PRIMARY YEARS - WHERE IT ALL BEGINS

17. In addition to dealing with a young, growing, as well as ethnically and linguistically diverse population, the Lao primary education system faces huge challenges in access to education and teacher training. The standard length of primary school is 5 years, after which students may complete 3 years of lower secondary and an additional 3 years of upper secondary. (Note: the GOL plans to add a twelfth year of study into the system by 2010.) Currently, there are approximately 8500 public primary schools in Laos serving about 900,000 students, with enrollments increasing every year both in numbers and the percentage of the age-appropriate population. Education at the primary level is supposed to be both compulsory and free, according to a 1996 Prime Minister's decree, but some very poor families cannot afford the fees for uniforms and materials, keeping some children out of the school system. Currently, over 57% of the adult population has not completed primary school. According to a 2006 study by the World Food Program, labor commitments were the greatest driver of the high rates of primary school dropouts and poor attendance records. Gender gaps also exist; a 2005 World Bank study indicates that while 92% of Lao-Tai girls in urban areas attend primary school, only 52% of non-Lao-Tai girls in rural areas participate.

18. Furthermore, while theoretically 80% of the villages have primary schools in their areas, only one-third of them offered the full 5 years of schooling. Average class size is approximately 70 students in rural areas, although the government says it intends to reduce that to a national average of 30-32 per class. Overall, it takes on average 8 years to complete the 5 primary grades, according to a 2007 unpublished UNESCO report, and only about 58% of students who begin in Grade 1 will make it through Grade 5.

19. Contacts in the Ministry of Education, up to and including both

vice ministers, are apparently sincere in their efforts to strengthen the primary education sector, including creating additional opportunities and access for minority groups. Most members of minority ethnic groups are in very remote areas, often off the road network, and sometimes in villages of 50-100 people. Building schools in all of these areas is simply beyond both the current resources of the Lao government and the current financial plans of the donor community. Cultural traditions among many of these groups do not value education highly, particularly for girls, further contributing to poor attendance and completion rates. The Ministry of Education is making an effort to identify teachers from within those ethnic groups to return to their communities, but the numbers are currently too small to effectively support that effort (see para 13). Finally, since these groups do not speak Lao as their primary language, it will take more than buildings and textbooks to bring education to the people; the GOL will need to teach teachers new strategies for encouraging education in a multicultural and multilingual classroom.

¶10. According to a UNESCO survey, 75% of poor households are ethnic minorities in remote communities, with higher rates of illiteracy and malnutrition and little access to health care. In response to these needs, particularly in the northern highlands, the World Food Program established a school feeding program in 2002 that encourages families to send their kids to school, particularly girls. Both girls and boys attending primary school in the 19 target districts not only get a midday meal, but are also given rations to take back to their families. In order to encourage parents to send their daughters to school, the take-home rations - consisting of rice, fish and iodized salt - is larger for girls than it is for boys. Students who live far away from their schools and are, in effect, informal boarders, are also given extra rice and fish as an evening meal. This project aims to reach over 140,000 students by 2010.

¶11. However, the government could also do much more with the resources it has. The GOL's slowness in approving memoranda of understanding for foreign assistance projects is a major source of frustration for donors, and the Ministry of Education is among the worst offenders in this regard. Approval for the USDA-funded school feeding/UXO clearance program, which required approval from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, took six months -- and that was considered unusually fast. Approvals for other MOUs have taken well over a year. On the other hand, one senior contact in the International Relations Department at the Ministry, now in the U.S. on a Humphrey Fellowship, notes that she does not have enough staff to coordinate all of the foreign projects already in place, and that it is nearly impossible for the GOL to monitor all of the foreign activity in this sector. The result, she says, is a wide array of uncoordinated and sometimes inefficient foreign-run programs resulting in textbook variations among schools, teachers learning different techniques, and other failures to achieve scaleable benefits.

¶12. Requirements for becoming a teacher are quite low, leaving students to learn from teachers who may not have more than even the most basic education themselves. Primary school teachers are

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selected from students who have completed lower secondary and are at least 15 years old. They must also complete 3 years of Primary Training School, usually at one of the teacher training colleges. Alternatively, students who have completed upper secondary need only finish one additional year for teacher training in order to become primary school teachers. Teachers are civil servants for the most part, and as such earn the standard government salary of between \$25-30 per month when they first enter the profession. However, in rural areas, just receiving the monthly wage may involve a trek of a few days to the provincial capital to get the cash, which may come several months late. Most teachers in those areas do not have bank accounts, and, even if they do, may not have banks within easy travel distance to pick up or deposit funds. Moreover, many need to have second jobs or work on farms in order to make ends meet. In late 2007, the Government announced that it would make more of an effort to pay teacher salaries on time. However, teachers may still lose several days of school time each month to travel to pick up their salaries. Low salaries and lack of steady payment make

attracting and retaining teachers in outlying provinces increasingly difficult, especially as the demand for educated labor in the urban areas continues to grow.

¶13. Lao education officials, including Vice Dean of the National University's Faculty of Education Bounseng Kannhavong, note that they cannot train enough teachers, and even those who trained do not always stay in the school system. Teachers who receive scholarships to university, contingent on an agreement to spend 3 years teaching in provincial schools, often find other jobs immediately after graduation. Others may go out to the provinces but return to the cities after only a few months. According to Vice Minister of Education Sengdeuane Lachanthaboun, the government tries to overcome cultural challenges by finding teachers from within the target ethnic group, training them at teacher training colleges, and sending them back to their district. At the primary level, she notes, having a teacher of the same ethnic group is often critical to convincing parents to send their children to school, particularly for the girls. Many ethnic groups, outside of the lowland Lao, do not value girls' education highly. However, the GOL has not been able to find and train sufficient numbers of teachers - of any ethnicity - to staff fully the primary schools in those areas.

THE FUTURE LOOKS BRIGHTER...AT LEAST ON PAPER

¶14. As part of the GOL's Millenium Development Goals, the Ministry of Education plans to have all of the appropriate age attend school by 2015, in other words, to comply with the 1996 compulsory education decree. Girls are to have equal access to education by the same target year. Literacy rates are supposed to top 85% by that time. Plans for improved supervision, better materials, supplies in every classroom, and improved teacher training are regularly aired in the media and at education conferences in Laos. In fact, programs sponsored by the World Bank and the Asia Development Bank will finance the printing of new primary school textbooks and continue to build new schools in underserved areas. Universal primary education is a focus for many international donors. Japan is currently the largest donor in the sector, having built 31 new schools since 1995.

¶15. In addition, the GOL has the stated intention of introducing both English and French into all primary schools by 2010. The Director General of the Education Ministry's Teacher Training Department, Professor Mithong Souvanvixay, told the newspaper Vientiane Times that the department would need to start enforcing scholarship requirements that students teach after graduation in order to fill the growing need for primary school teachers everywhere and ensuring that teachers who do not teach in the provinces repay their tuition costs.

¶16. Comment. Given that the Ministry of Education cannot find enough qualified teachers as it is, Post finds it difficult to believe that teachers qualified in both primary school education and English will be in the classrooms in any but the wealthiest urban districts by the 2010 target year. Similarly, the call for books and school supplies in every classroom present a huge challenge in a country with no copyright law to protect textbook drafters and few updated textbooks in the Lao language (since without such a law there is little incentive to write books of any kind in the Lao language). Donors can assist, but books in English, Thai, French, and other foreign languages are probably not going to help enough to reduce significantly the gaps at the primary school levels.

¶17. The low levels of education for teachers themselves will also be difficult to overcome. Teachers are often selected from the mid-ranks of school leavers - not highly ranked enough to choose their own field of study or pass the national university entrance exams, but still ranked high enough for local officials to send them to teacher training. In addition, poorer families will continue to face the challenge of trying to find the funds to pay the registration fees required by many public schools, and to buy supplies, uniforms, and transportation to schools. Post believes

that the GOL is sincere in its efforts improve primary education and has identified many of the challenges it faces. It is less clear where the GOL will get the resources to overcome those challenges. We do not expect to see the kind of investment in education, or the political will to drive national social mobilization to promote education, along the lines of Korea, Taiwan or Singapore 50 years ago. End comment.